The English City Riots of 2011, 'Broken Britain' and the Retreat into the Present

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Abstract

The responses to the English city riots of 2011 bear a remarkable resemblance to those of historical urban disorders in terms of the way in which they are framed by concerns over ‘moral decline’, ‘social malaise’ and a ‘lack of self-restraint’ among certain sections of the population. In this paper we draw on the work of Norbert Elias and take a long-term perspective in exploring historical precedents and parallels relating to urban disorder and anti-social behaviour. We reject the notion of ‘Broken Britain’ and argue that a more ‘detached’ perspective is necessary in order to appreciate that perceived crises of civilisation are ubiquitous to the urban condition. Through this historical analysis, framed by Elias’ theory of involvement and detachment, we present three key arguments. Firstly, that a ‘retreat into the present’ is evident among both policy discourse and social science in responding to contemporary urban disorder, giving rise to ahistorical accounts and the romanticisation of previous eras; secondly, that particular moral panics have always arisen, specifically focused upon young and working class populations and urban disorder; and, thirdly, that previous techniques of governance to control these populations were often far more similar to contemporary mechanisms than many commentators suggest. We conclude by advocating a long-term, detached perspective in discerning historical precedents and their direct linkages to the present; and in identifying what is particular about today’s concerns and responses relating to urban disorder.

Keywords: Riots; Urban Disorder; Governance of Conduct; Civility; Incivility; "Broken Britain"; Norbert Elias

Introduction

"Has the cycle of prosperity and progress closed?"

H.G. Wells (1927)

1.1 Lord Byron’s maiden speech to the House of Lords in February 1812 focused on widespread disorder across Britain and argued that ‘arising from circumstances of the most unparalleled distress... nothing but absolute want could have driven a large, and once honest and industrious body of people, into the commission of excesses so hazardous to themselves, their families, and their communities’ (quoted in Adams, 2010, p.84).

1.2 These tropes of unparalleled anxiety, a decline in honesty and work endeavour and actions damaging to rioters’ own communities, are remarkably similar to the discourses surrounding the riots in English cities in August 2011. The Prime Minister, David Cameron (2011) framed the UK coalition government’s responses to the riots as a ‘social fight back’ within an understanding of ‘a complete absence of self-restraint’ and ‘a slow-motion moral collapse that has taken place in parts of our country these past few generations’, mirroring the response of Nicolas Sarkozy to the disturbances in French banlieues in 2005. The UK governmental response included harsh sentencing for those found guilty of involvement in the riots and extraordinary measures such as attempting to evict households linked to the riots from social housing tenancies. Stater (2011) linked the riots to class territorial stigmatisation and a denial of dignity in cities within the reengineering of the neoliberal state building upon the work of Wacquant (2008) on advanced marginality.

1.3 In this paper, we utilise the sociology of Norbert Elias and historians such as Pinker (2011) to explore historical precedents and parallels relating to urban disorder and anti-social behaviour (an approach advocated by Rodger (2006, 2008) and Powell and Flint (2009)). We begin by summarising contemporary discourses about ‘Broken Britain’ and the evidence for this and then provide an account of Elias’ relevant theories. We continue by presenting three key arguments: firstly that a ‘retreat into the present’ by both policy discourse and social science (see Cole, 2001; Garrett, 2007) fails to recognise that perceived crises of civilisation are ubiquitous to the urban condition; secondly that particular moral panics have always arisen, specifically focused upon young and working class populations and urban disorder; and,
thirdly, that previous techniques of governance to control these populations were often far more similar to contemporary mechanisms than commentaries suggest. We conclude that, although history is often invoked in contemporary discourses about social class, both policy makers and social scientists should develop a fuller understanding of the historical sociological consequences of urban change and the governmental and policing techniques used to regulate them.

**Broken Britain and De-Civilising Processes?**

2.1 The paradigm of ‘Broken Britain’ predates the riots of 2011. The previous New Labour government’s ‘Respect’ agenda, championed by Prime Minister Tony Blair was founded on a belief that ‘values necessary for citizenship is widely held – and that this change has led to an increase in disrespectful behaviour (Respect Task Force, 2006, p. 5; see Powell and Flint, 2009). An increasing policy focus on the concept of ‘resilience’ was utilised to confront uncertainties arising from environmental emergencies, terrorism and social conflict (Cabinet Office, 2009). The Conservative’s definition of a ‘Broken Britain’ has been persistent; and occurred from 2006, when the Prime Minister argued that deep cultural changes were required within communities lacking the abilities to cope with modern life (Cameron, 2010; Conservative Party, 2010) and this understanding of de-civilising tendencies in particular communities was also shared by some critics of governmental policy (Rodger, 2008). The Social Justice Policy Group’s **Breakdown Britain** report (2006) re-articulated a long-standing concern about an ever growing “underclass” while Alan Duncan MP (2007) described, in a speech to the Centre for Policy Studies, the need to ‘de-civilise Britain’ to counter a ‘real life Lord of the Flies’ (imagery also used by Melanie Phillips (2011) in immediate response to the riots). For commentators such as Browne (2006) Britons have a widespread sense of decline in morals or values and ‘despite some moral improvements’, family breakdown, drug and alcohol abuse and welfare dependency have ‘unequivocally increased’ in the last two decades whilst a decline in social capital is ‘evident’ (ibid, pp.1-2). Browne argues that, compared to the Victorian era, there has been a ‘disappearance of deference’ citing declining (Christian) church attendance and the decimation of the value of hard work. Brown’s thesis negates a wealth of historical evidence about the ambiguities of attitudes to the Church and other authorities, very high levels of alcohol and drug consumption and violence in the Victorian era, the prevalence of graffiti and vandalism and, indeed, early acts of urban ‘graffiti art’ on London’s west end in 1894 (Stott, 2010; Hunt, 2004; Kneale, 2001; O’Neill, 2006; Pearson, 2009). But Browne cites study indicating that this thesis is widely shared by the British population, with a perceived decline in morals, respect for authority and an increase in anti-social behaviour.

2.2 However, Griffith et al. (2011), in a Young Foundation report, state that there is a lack of ‘objective evidence’ for a decline in civility; arguing that Britain remains a well-mannered and courteous society where casual violence and racism have declined, as have perceptions of anti-social behaviour during the 2000s (see Upson, 2006), whilst neighbourliness and volunteering may have increased; although they link ‘high streets descending into violence’ in the riots of 2011 with parts of housing estates becoming ‘no-go areas’ and antitrials of different housing tenures. The idea of different ‘Think Tanks should be noted here, including the Centre for Social Justice headed by Iain Duncan Smith, and the Young Foundation with strong links to the New Labour governments (see Welshman (2012) for a historical account of the links between research and policy on cycles of deprivation and ‘problem families’). The idea of deprived neighbourhoods has also been employed by Mooney (2009). Griffith et al. (2011) locate civility as an important dimension of interactions with strangers which increase in modern societies (‘we have to be so polite because we’re so different’ (p.26)) although they suggest that this generates new flashpoints, rather than the wider and longer-term inculation of self-restraint and the ‘sharpening of the regulation and binding of the emotional economy’ hypothesised by Elias (2001, p.106) and other social theorists (see, e.g., Swan, 1995; Woudstra, 2011) and others. Elias’s work, which of course influenced Elias greatly, offers something of a synthesis between these two arguments, suggesting that civilisation intensified the repression of an instinctual life and magnified anxiety as modern life created a permanent irreconcilability between individual drives and social demands (see Overy, 2010, p.161).

2.3 Griffith et al (2011) correctly argue for a wider definition of civility beyond etiquette (which is often based on an insider/outsider nexus, as identified by Elias and Scotson (1994)). It is also the case that discourses of civility and civilisation are predominately defined based on the prejudices and expectations of a self-conscious cultural tradition of the educated and dominant classes, which emphasises ‘high’ culture and polite social behaviour (Elias, 2000; Overy, 2010, p.23). This civic landscape, constructed through language, buildings, rituals and symbols, dominates the representation of the urban (and its problems) to itself (Croll, 1999; Hunt, 2004). Within these representations, concern with the welfare of working class populations has always coincided simultaneously with fears about their morality. These were combined in early industrial legislation including the Health and Morals of Apprentices Act 1802 (see Adams, 2010) and later the propagation of different ‘house systems’ (Croll, 1999). The moral and physical condition of the working classes employed in the cotton manufacture in Manchester. This conflict of laissez-faire economics and utilitarian moralities of public welfare, developed in the 1830s, is still being played out in the conditions of neoliberal late modernity (Adams, 2010, p.242) and the coexistence of concern for welfare and social fear has important implications for our understanding of social processes. In particular, knowledge and emotions - mainly the notable ‘safety-danger balance’ which shapes the level of social fears within society - and it is to this theoretical body of work that we now turn.

**Norbert Elias, the retreat into the present and civilisation as an ambivalent process**

3.1 It is our contention that the long-term, detached and process-oriented sociology of Norbert Elias provides appropriate theoretical tools for understanding the ubiquity of crises of civilisation. Elias’ synthesis can also elaborate the striking similarities in terms of the governance of “problematic” populations within different periods of crisis and the targeted nature of these techniques of control. We therefore wish to focus on two salient aspects of Elias’ sociology relevant to the discussion that follows. Firstly, we discuss Elias’ sociology of knowledge and its relationship to emotions through a focus on his concept of the ‘retreat into the present’ (Elias, 1987b). Secondly, we explore the notion of ambivalence in Elias’ work with reference to social relations and the counter-currents evident within the overall civilizing process.

3.2 One of the striking aspects of responses to the 2011 riots in English cities, and indeed contemporary
urban disorder more broadly, is the commonality in responses from political, media and academic sources. These responses are largely related to immediate concerns about moral decline and respect within today’s society and often fail to garner insights from the experiences of earlier societies. Using Norbert Elias’ theory of involvement and detachment (1987a) we would argue that this represents a retreat into the present’ (1987b) on the part of social scientists, politicians and social commentators alike. The theory of involvement and detachment is central to Elias’ theoretical synthesis and runs through much of his work. For Elias, human knowledge (and therefore the development of the social sciences) is bound up in the development of overall society and therefore unplanned and unforeseen (see Goudsblom, 1977).

According to Elias, the concepts of involvement and detachment are not separate, indeed varying degrees of both are always present, but can be best understood as the unattainable extreme poles of a spectrum (i.e. total involvement (at the end) and total detachment at the other), along which the dynamic interplay of the two varies: sometimes more involved and less detached, and vice versa.

‘Only small babies, and among adults perhaps only insane people, become involved in whatever they happen to be about to their feelings, desires etc. complete now; and again only the insane can remain totally unmoved by what goes on around them. Normally adult behaviour lies on a scale somewhere between these two poles’ (Elias, 1987a, p.3).

3.3 As far as sociology is concerned it is the continuum that lies between these marginal poles that presents the principalising of people on this continuum and the criteria for different degrees of involvement and detachment. Elias clarifies his use of this terminology and says: when speaking of involvement and detachment, ‘one refers in short to changing equilibria between sets of mental activities which in humans’ relations with other humans, with non-human objects and with themselves have the function to involve and detach’ (Elias, 1987a, p.4).

3.4 Elias contrasts the position of the institutionalized and more detached natural scientist with that of the social scientist. Over the long-term humans’ control of emotions in their experience of nature has increased compared to earlier societies: previously people had very little control over natural forces, were often dependent on them for their survival, and thus plagued by insecurity. It is not difficult to understand that they could not be involved in natural events with strong feelings and emotions; they were too deeply involved to look at natural phenomena, like distant observers, calmly (Elias, 1987a, p.8). Elias refers to this situation as the ‘double-bind’ process: a higher danger level perpetuating a higher affect in emotional responses. It is the presence of this ‘double-bind process’ in humans’ experiences of social phenomena - in people’s relations with each other - which resonates with concerns over urban disorder, anti-social and street-level crime linked to an increasingly pervasive ‘decline in the discourse of urban and moral decline. And furthermore, this double-bind process is an inherent characteristic of the human and urban condition. That is:

‘While in people’s relations with non-human forces the standard of both the control of self and that of external events is relatively high, in relations of people with people the socially required and socially bred standard of both is considerably lower’ (Elias, 1987a, p.11).

3.5 As Elias points out problems of knowledge are often discussed as if knowledge existed in a human vacuum, whereas in fact their condition and personality (their ‘persona’) - a perspective central to his vehement rejection of philosophy: His criticisms of the western philosophical tradition were fervent and consistent, particularly over the conception of the person (in the singular) as the subject of knowledge emphasised by Descartes, Locke and Kant among others (Mennell and Goudsblom, 1998, p.33). Elias is highly critical of contemporary sociologists who still uncritically draw upon philosophy and the range of static antinomies it perpetuates (e.g. truth/value, rational/irrational) (Kilminster, 1998), sociologists who have confined themselves to the issues of the present and in the process have lost the ground gained by the battles and advances of the earlier sociological pioneers such as Marx or Weber (Kilminster, 1987, p.216), both of whom looked to the past when seeking the answers to the problems of their own societies:

‘The preoccupation of the sociologists with the social problems and conflicts of the present represents a dominance of involved thinking - they are highly emotionally absorbed in those problems and issues. Their very involvement indeed galvanizes them in the pursuit of short-term, empirical knowledge in order to illuminate the problems about which they feel so strongly’ (Kilminster, 1997, p.216).

3.6 Thus the need for a long-term, detached perspective in responding to incidences of urban disorder is crucial to our understanding: an emotionally-driven retreat into the present can serve to blind us to historical precedents and long-term social processes and block the path to an understanding of what is unique about the present situation. This retreat can also be particularly damaging where it results in short-term social misdiagnoses of contemporary problems (Kilminster, 2008) and the legitimization of civilising offenses (Powell and Flint, 2009; Powell, 2010; Rodger, 2008); both of which have a tendency to be targeted at particular stigmatised (outsider) groups. To summarize, a higher danger level in our experience of relations with other people perpetuates a higher level of emotional response. In terms of the current as involvement and detachment, this is manifested in the upper part of the scale, and a social fear of certain populations and urban spaces, and perpetuated by pervasive and unproblematised constructions of the ‘causes of decline’ (note how decline is a given). The “current crisis” is then accentuated by unfavourable comparisons with previous societies, which are invariably based on a romanticised and nostalgic perspective of bygone eras (e.g. the relative “tranquility” and “civility” of the Victorian era).

3.7 For our purposes here, it is useful to complement this notion of a retreat into the present, precipitated by involved thinking, with a brief discussion of the inherent ambivalence of social relations that characterise civilising processes. Central to Elias’s sociology is the assertion that human figurations are in a constant state of flux between civilized and uncivilized and that the process of civilisation is not a linear process of linear progress, but rather a process of civilisation.

more on this period) - a time of heightened sensitivity to the notion of an erosion of morals within society:

'And seen at close quarters...it seems to lead to a relaxation of the constraints imposed on individuals by social life. But on closer examination it is not difficult to perceive that this is merely a very slight recession, one of the fluctuations that constantly arise from the complexity of the historical movement within each phase of the total process' (Elias, 2000, p.157).

3.8 This notion of divergent phases within the overall, long-term civilizing process has been developed further by Cas Wouters in his theory of informalization, defined as 'the trend towards diminishing formality and rigidity in the regimes of manners and emotions and emotional and emotional alternatives' (Wouters, 2007, p.8) (see Powell and Flint, 2009; Powell, 2010). These shifts and counter-trends inherent in civilizing processes can certainly serve to heighten perceptions of a loss of self-restraint and moral decline but, yet again, it is the involved thinking which results in a misunderstanding of such processes (Kohnstetter, 2008) as 'people can frequently see nothing in these changes, the decline, degeneration and destruction, only as an expression of loosening of the code of behaviour and feeling, without which a society must fall into destruction' (Elias quoted in Mennell and Goudsblom, 1998, p.245).

3.9 In what follows we draw upon these theoretical standpoints and take a long-term perspective in suggesting the recurrence of crises of civilisation as a characteristic of the urban condition and point to common historical responses to these perceived crises.

A Perpetual Crisis of the Present

4.1 According to Judd (2010, p.8) 'we have entered an age of insecurity - economic insecurity, physical insecurity, political insecurity', characterised by deep-seated anxieties about change and narratives of uncertainty and decline (see also Hall, 2007; Sibley, 2003) and a loss of ontological security as the constancy of social and material environments is perpetually undermined (Giddens, 1990). The roots of our present condition, often identified from the 1970s, are described as 'an age of anxiety' (Mackay, 1993) or 'angst society' (Scott, 2000). Three features dominate this paradigm of a contemporary crisis. Firstly, that social solidarities have declined and consequently a 'habit of self-restraint has unravelled' (Pratt, 2005) as materialism and selfishness dominate contemporary life and the social stigmatisation of lower social groups intensifies (Judd, 2010; Jones, 2011; Slater, 2011). Secondly, that the fragility of routines and habits in the face of a vertiginous variety of late modernity (Young, 2007). Thirdly, that we become ever more aware of risks (Beck, 1992) and the insecurities and precariousness of our present position (Colic-Peisker and Johnson, 2010).

4.2 We set out three arguments in response. Firstly, that conceptualisations of the fracturing of old ideas of discipline or order in cities need to be located within ‘ceaseless narratives of decline’ (Pearson, 2009) and that, from contemporary society being subject to a uniquely perceived moment of crisis, such moments are inherent and ubiquitous to the human and urban condition. As Overy (2010) describes, these are represented as threats to ‘our way of life’ that persist even in periods of relative stability and/or prosperity. The moral panic in this specific context (Ben-Yehuda and Goldstone, 1994; Cohen, 1972) although these are important and we provide examples. But these panics are symptomatic of a wider context in which a crisis of civilisation, and discursive and governmental responses, are a constant feature of urban and national histories. Secondly, we argue that specific concerns about urban disorder and young people have previous parallels and predecessors that have been under-represented in contemporary sociology. Thirdly, we suggest that, linked to this, there is considerable continuity in practices of governance in the fields of anti-social behaviour, and how these are responded to by the subjects of these practices, which require further attention.

4.3 We acknowledge that the proponents of a contemporary age of insecurity are aware of historical precedents and the ambiguities and the persistence of perceptions of moral decline in each generation (Brown, 2008; Judd, 2010; Slater, 2011). We also accept that, as Elias (2000) and Pinker (2011) have demonstrated, forms of social restraint and control do change; and that these changes reflect corresponding alternations in standards of conduct driven by dynamic social relations and changing power balances that characterise human figurations (Elias, 2000; Wouters, 1986, 2007). For example Charles Booth (1887) noted how the habit of smoking in the street became socially acceptable in the later 19th century when previously it had been inadmissible. Similarly, Sennett (1993) discusses ‘revolt against the past’ by women in urban cities around 1890 in relation to the process of the ‘de-Victorianising’ of clothes. We also agree with previous studies that have identified specific civilising offensives, how they reflect the standards of particular phases of development (Elias, 2000) and how these can also involve enhanced or relaxed social or governmental control, for example prohibition in the United States in the early 20th century (Ben-Yehuda and Goode, 1994) or the increasing persecution of homosexuals in Georgian London in the 1720s (Cruckshank, 2010).

4.4 But we suggest the need for a more explicit articulation of history in these accounts. This matters because it is vital to our sociological understanding and to our assessment of current regimes of governance. Historical traditions have contributed to sociology and analysis of regimes of governance, including the oral and cultural history works of Wilmott and Young (1957) and Hoggart (1957), the social economic histories of Bottomore (1964) on elites, and class structure and genealogies of governance (Foucault, 1977). This is not simply an abstract discussion of previous, but disconnected, cycles of history. Rather, their direct linkages to the present must be better understood. For example, the tenacity of historicist narratives, spatial orders, identities and social stigmatisation and temporary action, such that ‘ghosts run the city’ (Berman, 1988; Body-Gendrot, 2000; Fraser, 1996; Robertson et al., 2008) and place is perpetually possessed by what Bowden (2011, p.15) terms ‘time-deepened psychogeographies’. This also requires us to reinvigorate our understanding of urban form and its dynamics. For example, Cruckshank (2010) shows how much of the Georgian architecture now much valued in our towns and cities was a result of unstable property speculation in response to short-term profit motives equivalent to the contemporary processes much critiqued as being responsible for the failures of urban planning and housing crises. Cruckshank also argues that this architecture was significantly financed by the economics of the Georgian sex industry. In presenting historical cases, we wish to move beyond a simple argument that ‘the good old days’ never existed or that we have been here before. Rather, we wish to promote an Eliasian perspective to support the thesis of Pinker (2011) that, in
4.5 Our first argument is that periods of perceived crisis in the urban condition are ubiquitous in western societies. For example, the period between 1871 and 1917 has been characterised as an age of destabilisation and a moment of crisis in western cities (Buttenworth, 2010). Overy (2010) describes the decades of the 1920s and 1930s in Britain as a ‘morbid’ age and a ‘crisis of civilisation’, in which anxiety, along with ‘the glittering promise of mass consumption and a narcotic hedonism’ was a defining feature of culture (ibid, p.2). Beatrice Webb’s description of a 1920s ‘moral malaise’ characterised by ‘an atmosphere of morbid alcoholism and sexuality, lurtive larceny and unashamed mendacity’ (ibid) resonated in Overy’s observation that ‘the Roaring Twenties’ corresponds to the ‘wave of informalization’, identified by Wouters (2007), and concerns over standards of behaviour and promiscuity as Brighton emerged as a ‘dirty weekend’ destination (Shields, 1990) for instance.

4.6 Of course, the presence of previous periods of crisis does not necessarily invalidate arguments that we are living through a contemporary period characterised by crisis or a retreat from progress or security in the immediately preceding epoch. For many contemporary commentators, the period from the second world war to the mid-1970s in western societies may retrospectively be understood as a ‘bubble’ of prosperous security and relative comfort (Judd, 2010, p.52) in which, for example, unemployed populations would not have aspersions cast upon them and where working class communities were less subject to social opprobrium (Judd, 2010; Jones, 2011). Or, as Wouters (1986) puts it, a period when people were gradually more inclined to identify with the underdog in recognition of the fact that unequal relations were ‘unharmonious’. However, we would counter this by suggesting that, despite evident progressive social programmes and increasing material equality in relative terms, a more detailed understanding of the fragility and limitations of economic growth and development reveals the ambiguities and distinctions towards the 1930s and later and within working class populations and the project of the welfare state (Elia and Scotton, 1994; Hoggart, 1957; Kynaston, 2008, 2010; Young and Wilnett, 1957).

4.7 In addition, juvenile delinquency and a loss of work ethic remained a ‘pressing concern’ in the post-war years as did the perceived need to ‘reclaim delinquents for the nation’ (Kynaston, 2008, p.367). For example, in 1955 a prominent report entitled Citizens of Tomorrow claimed that recruits to the armed forces ‘had a poor physique, poor education and lacked religious knowledge, self-confidence, initiative and a sense of responsibility’ (Kynaston, 2010, p.548), mirroring the discourses about young people in contemporary Britain, preceding and following the riots in 2011. So, just as crises of urban civilisations have their historical parallels, the juxtaposition of neo-liberalism with its preceding decades corresponds with the First World War being represented as a fracture from pre-war expectations of relentless advance (Overy, 2010), or conditions in Victorian cities including morbas, sexual conduct and indulgence in ‘stimulants’ during the Industrial Revolution destroying Georgian motifs of urban patriotism and progress (Hall, 1998; Hunt, 2004).

Liquid Modernity and its Vertigo

4.8 Before turning to urban disorder, it is worth making a more general point about the extent to which the sociology of contemporary urban conditions may be regarded as specific to our own epoch. We have already identified how influential works by Bauman (2005), Young (2007), Beck (1992) and Giddens (1990) have characterised contemporary changes as one of bewildering economic and social change. A life in which risk becomes ever more prominent and anchors of tradition, habit and community become unsettled with the speed of rapidly evolving communications, technologies, employment practices, population flows and the new skills required to navigate these changes. Indeed, Griffith et al. (2011, p.33) explicitly link these trends to civilising processes, arguing that ‘old-fashioned civility could also be a means of coping with the constant flux’ (Giddens, 1990) is equivalent to previous periods in its emotional and social effects upon certain populations. For example, accounts of cities in England during the Industrial Revolution abound with descriptions of the importance of time to London’s ‘rushing citizens’ (Adams, 2010, p.233); ‘the step of haste, ‘how hurried men are’, ‘how they are terrifyingly chased into double-quick speed’ and how the world moves at a ‘smarter pace’ than before as the new metropolises ‘accelerated the rhythm of exchange and ceaselessly stirred up men’s lives’ (see Hall, 1998; Hunt, 2004). Robert Park identified similar phenomena in Chicago in the 1920s: ‘Everything is loose and free, but everything is problematic’ (Introduction to Zorbaugh, 1929, p. xvii) and, in the same period in Britain there was an ‘increase in nervous instability due to the rush of modern life...and general uncertainty as to the future’ (Overy, 2010, p.134). Traditional attachments were viewed as vanishing, ‘sustained social belonging’ as ‘not evanescent’ and being ‘sustained and belonging’ (Toynbee, 1884; Zorbaugh, 1929). Similarly, Beck’s important work on risk in late modernity (1992) requires cognisance of previous periods when our relationship with the future has been reframed. For example, as Dillon (2006, p.380) argues, during the early 19th Century when through gambling, stock-dealing and insurance the future became calculable, challenging the religiously-dominated pre-determinism of previous ages. So, although Judd (2010, p.1) may still be correct to suggest that ‘something is going on’ and that there was ‘a version of a regime’ when we ordered our lives differently (ibid, p.39) we do need a more precise understanding about what is unique or different about the sociological effects of contemporary changes on urban populations.

Urban Disorders, Gangs and Young People

5.1 The historical precedents for the riots in English cities and towns in August 2011 are evident. In 1898, during a particularly hot British summer, the media and political classes were exercised by concerns about August bank holidays and celebrations leading to drunkenness, fighting, street robberies and assaults (Savage, 2007, p.904). Similarly, Charles Booth documented concerns about the ‘abandonment of restraint’, including sexual conduct, on bank holidays (Booth, 1967, p.308). These particular temporal and spatial events were located in a longer history of gangs, including female gangs, for example in New
York in the 1850s and a narrative of increasing juvenile delinquency featuring gangs with clearly demarcated neighbourhood territories and large scale urban disorder, for example a battle of ‘Scuttlers’ in Manchester in 1890 involving at least 500 participants (Savage, 2007). As Davies notes, ‘scuttling gangs were neighbourhood-based youth gangs which were formed in working class districts across the Manchester conurbation’ (Davies, 1986, p.2) in the late nineteenth century. Indeed, there is a clear resonance with twenty-first century social discourse in Davies’ account. For example, in a court hearing regarding a street robbery by a scuttling gang one Inspector went as far as to say that the four defendants were from a ‘gang of scuttlers, who were the terror of the neighbourhood they infested’ (Davies, 1986, p.82) - a statement containing clear echoes of the post-riots media discourse on feral families and ‘wild beasts’ (Hastings, 2011; White, 2011). Not only in terms of the dehumanization of the ‘problematic youth’ (I referred to earlier) but it also would appear that such discursive constructions are evident between the two eras, with the respectable clearly distinguished from the anti-social or the morally uncaring society. As ever, at the time these were conceptualised as ‘new developments’ with a new class of ‘city boy’ or ‘slum denizen’. Savage (2007) and Pearson (2009) identify how problematic youth groups such as the ‘apaches’ of Paris (or later Sheffield in the 1920s, see Bean, 1981) or the hooligans (see Daily Telegraph, 2011) were largely a media creation amplifying the behaviour of a minority into a generalised climate of fear (see Cohen, 1972).

The ‘Hooligan’ was to embark on a spectacular official career in the early years of the twentieth century, not in person then at least in name, of course. In 1911, numerous committees of inquiry into the troubled state of the nation. He looked large in the inspirations for Baden-Powell’s Boy Scouts... He would be feared by some as the herald of a dark hour in the nations affairs” (Pearson, 2009, p.53).

5.2 But what is striking is how the underpinning causes of youth delinquency, epitomised in street disorder, were historically described in terms and concepts that mirror almost identically the current responses to the 2011 riots. Savage (2007) describes how, a century before ‘hoodies’, connections were made between dress style and delinquency (a process continued through the mods and rockers of the 1960s and the football casuals of the 1980s). supposed ‘unfulfilled desires for consumption’ epitomised youth delinquency in the first half of the 20th Century just as acquisitve loafing, materialism, brands and marketing have driven domestic Victimo Panel, 2011; Stater, 2011; see also Bauman, 1998). Additionally, the rejection of salaried work and conflict within families was applied to earlier youth disturbances (Savage, 2007) just as the lack of a work ethic and family breakdown are defining features of the current ‘Broken Britain’ paradigm. Beyond actual urban disorder, young people ‘loafing’ around the streets in large and ‘embarrassing’ crowds were problematic for the police and commentators of the 1960s and 1930s alike (Booth, 1967; Savage, 2007). Increases in juvenile delinquency numbers in both England and Germany during the First World War were further linked to a lack of the presence of fathers or other male authority figures, pre-empting the identification of a lack of responsibility foremost as a key catalyst for the 2011 riots (Cameron, 2011; Centre for Social Justice, 2011; Savage, 2007, p.161).

Techniques of Governance

6.1 There are also powerful similarities in the techniques of governance and mechanisms of policing urban disorder that can be identified with methods of regulation in the nineteenth period. Some of the terms regularly cited as specific features of contemporary society existed previously. For example, the legitimacy and authority of police officers and urban park attendants in the period from 1880 to 1930 was constantly challenged and undermined, with offenders regularly ignoring, ridiculing and, in some cases, assaulting these figures of government (Bean, 1981; Croll, 1999; Mame, 2001). In addition, neighbours were often afraid to give evidence because of fear of reprisals (Pearson, 2009).

6.2 Governmental and policing responses often involved methods that mirror those of today, including exceptional powers in response to specific events. Following a series of disorders at northern racecourse meetings in the 1880s, some Secretaries of State considered a short Act of Parliament empowering magistrates to inflict heavier punishments for gang hooliganism based solely on police evidence (Bean, 1981). New forms of policing were utilised from the Victorian era onwards to address violence and incivility related to football matches (Curry, 2007; Davies, 2006; Pearson, 2009). The contemporary use of Anti-social Behaviour Orders and Dispersal Orders which limit the spatial movement and social association of individuals in the tactics of the Flying Squad in much of the Metropolitan Police, and the recent use of public powers in Sheffield instigating a rule that gang members were not allowed to congregate or travel in groups of more than three (Bean, 1981). As with the responses to the 2011 riots, these were conceived as exceptional and temporary measures to address a specific and magnified moment of urban disorder.

6.3 The current debate about alcohol pricing and the regulation of licensed premises and the night-time economy, and techniques such as Pub Watch which link establishments and prohibit individuals from entering these establishments (Hadfield, 2006) replicate police pressure on landlords not to serve gang members in 1920s Sheffield (Bean, 1981); or the use of a black list in late Victorian Merthyr Tydfil, which included the names of offenders who could be excluded for three years, being circulated to all publicans (Croll, 1999, p.264). This technique was similar to the use of the expanding local press to publicise details about individual transgressors in order to utilise the mechanism of shame to regulate urban space (Croll, 1999; Elias, 2000). These have their contemporary corollaries in the publicising of individuals subject to Anti-Social Behaviour Orders or the listing of fare avoiders by metro, rail and bus companies (Powell and Flint, 2009), or the use of the ‘Not Wanted List’ which presents the names and previous addresses of individuals banned from accessing the premises and grounds of New York City Housing Authority (see <http://home2.nyc.gov/html/nycha/downloads/pdf/12feebe.pdf>). The limitations of shaming mechanisms were identified by Croll (1999, p.266) as some black listed individuals ‘were immune to the civilising power of the public gaze’ and ‘revelled in the notoriety’, just as Anti-social Behaviour Orders are subject to them (although empirical research (McIntosh, 2008) challenges this interpretation). As Croll (1999) and Elias (2000) suggest, these techniques of governance promote ‘self-control’ as a key mechanism for ‘civilising’ the urban landscape. Finally, contemporary debates about the responsibility of citizens to ‘stand up’ to anti-social behaviour (Powell and Flint, 2009), the emergence of the riots clean-up campaign organised through Twitter (see Castells, 2011) and the increasingly complex assemblages of public and private security regimes in our cities have their precedents. These include press demands for the formation of a


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national guard to protect property in the period leading to Second Reform Bill of 1832 (Adams, 2010, p.229); the ‘vigilance committees’ of late Victorian Britain (Coll, 1999); and organisations such as the Society for Reformation of Manners (who actively used agent provocateurs to prosecute homosexuals in Georgian London, Cruickshank, 2010) and the National Council of Public Morals and Public Morality Council in Britain in the 1930s.

Conclusions

7.1 In critiquing contemporary understandings of social conditions, it is surely correct to identify with Cooke Taylor’s observation in 1842 (quoted in Hunt, 2004, p.209) that populations develop new habits or thoughts and actions formed by the circumstances of their conditions. From an Eliasian perspective we would also emphasize the role of changing social interdependencies in disseminating conduct, and the nature of power balances in shaping these new habits and actions. What we have tried to demonstrate and argue for in this paper is the need for a more precise identification of the sociological impacts of contemporary change and the specific novel elements of governance which are more informed by historical knowledge than by the imagination of the past. By way of example, in terms of governance in response to these populations, we have also suggested that the lack of acknowledgement of historical precedents in terms of ‘crises of civilisation’ has its roots in a predominance of ‘involved’ thinking which has precipitated a retreat into the present and a neglect of long-term social processes.

7.2 However, once we shift beyond static conceptions and take an approach which emphasises the ambivalence of civilising processes we cannot rely towards a better understanding of the roots and manifestations of today’s urban antagonisms, but also reveal the areas which might yield fruitful inquiry in understanding what is unique about today’s concerns. That is, an appreciation of historical continuities gives rise to an understanding of difference. Following Elias’ cue, comparison of incivilities in different eras might also be complemented by a detailed contrasting of the social relations of those periods, far more extensively than has been possible here, in order to illuminate the effects of changing power relations and social processes which impact upon behavioural expectations. For example the contemporary focus on urban youth would benefit from an understanding of changes which have impacted upon young people’s socialisation, varying standards of conduct and power relations relative to earlier eras. From an Eliasian perspective this, in turn, points to important social developments in the UK (and other countries which are absent from prominent accounts) which are associated with decivilising processes and moral and urban decline. While we have discussed striking similarities between different eras, comparison also highlights distinctions which we would suggest require detailed investigation if we are to move towards an understanding of what is particular about today’s manners and behaviour. For a start, such areas for inquiry might include: the changing distance between childhood and adulthood and the dichotomy between the transition of the child; the changing distance between childhood and adulthood and the dichotomy between the transition in the proclamation of the rights of children from the mid-twentieth century onwards; and the varying impact of individualisation processes and changes in behavioural expectations.

7.3 One of the strengths of Elias’ theory is the emphasis placed on the relationship between emotions, social processes and knowledge. As we have argued, this conception is particularly helpful in critiquing what is often perceived as a contemporary social malaise. Perspectives on social and moral decline are often charged with emotionally-driven views and ideas about the groups and communities at the source of this decline, and this vilification can be accentuated by a rise in the ‘fear of crime’ fuelled by media discourse, moral panic and bygone eras (Croll, 1999; Davies, 2007). These interrelated trends impact on perceptions of a relative moral decline and diminution in respect in which these trends are not seen as universal, nor in historical perspective, but are aligned with particular ‘outsider’ groups to which those ‘in fear’ (the established) disidentify from. This suggests the need for a renewed emphasis on historical group relations in any understanding of urban antagonisms. In Eliasian terms, the heightened danger level - whether perceived or real - has a significant bearing on our knowledge and views on urban disorder, incivility and civilisation. Elias (1967a) would argue that for those involved in the production of this knowledge there is an imperative need for a detached perspective in order to recognise historical precedents, learn from them, and to continue the shift towards a higher level of reality-congruent knowledge.

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Notes

1Elias did not engage in debates with his peers or contemporary sociologists in the conventional sense. As Kilminster notes: ‘He only obliquely engages with the theories of other writers or schools... This abstention from getting involved in contemporary debates is quite deliberate. It is in order not to be diverted from the primary task at hand - empirical research - by elaborate in-house sociological discussions’ (1987, p.215).

References


